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A Hole In The Ground

While other visitors to London went to see Buckingham Palace, London Bridge, the Houses of Parliament, and Madame Toussaud's, I went in search of a building. Not only because I had seen the other sights half a dozen times on previous visits, but because it was more important to me personally to look for Bloomsbury House than it was to see Stalin one more time in a wax museum.

Two questions urge themselves on people when I tell them this. They want to know, for one thing, how a building can disappear, adding that even buildings which have been bombed must have a geographic spot on a map so that one can at least say: "Here is where it stood"; and, further, they wonder why it was so all important to locate the place where the house used to stand, or maybe was still standing, that I chose to forgo the pleasure of sightseeing in London. Both questions deserve an answer but I am going to reverse the order.

I left Nazi-occupied Austria in March 1939, one year after the country was overrun by Hitler, and spent the next fourteen months in Hertforshire, near London. I worked in a cardboard manufacturing plant for the equivalent of 30 cents an hour, which had to suffice for all my needs. Before the beginning of the war with Germany on September 3, 1939, I had been free to go wherever I liked, but once the war was on I, as an alien, needed a special permit to take the train to London, where from time to time I called at Bloomsbury House, near the British Museum, to collect a few second-hand clothes benevolent British people deposited for indigent immigrants.

I never had any trouble finding the place, which was in walking distance from the King's Cross railway station. Despite language difficulties I was able to ask my way to the house which provided me, free of charge, with everything I wore for more than a year, but had no money to pay for. The train fare was all I needed to avoid going to my daily factory job in tatters. From the King's Cross terminal to Bloomsbury House it was a fifteen minute walk, and since I always returned to the train after collecting my clothes, because the authorities issuing my permit insisted on my immediate return, I never saw anything of London during those early war months. Nor would I have had the money for an extended afternoon in the capital.

But when, after the war, most of which I had spent in America, I went back for a visit, I could no longer find my Bloomsbury House, source and symbol of British hospitality and good will. I was told by people in the neighborhood that it had been bombed out, converted, renovated, or under a different management. In reality nobody really seemed to know, or care. A map I bought at the station showed the same streets I had traipsed years earlier, but when I reached the street I knew so well I could see no house which remotely looked like the spot I had set my heart on finding. There were some empty lots, of which postwar London had many, and I concluded that one of them had to be the one I was looking for. But I was not sure, even though

I walked up and down, trying to remember the lay of the land as I had left the building many times with a bundle under my arm.

A hotel doorman, a block from the British Museum, whom I guessed to be old enough to remember the prewar neighborhood, escorted me to an empty lot he declared to be the right spot, adding that Bloomsbury House had stood squarely where we now stood, and that it had been razed soon after 1945 rather than bombed. It was now a fenced-in area of stones and weeds. And with that answer I had to be satisfied. The debris reminded me of a synagogue in Vienna which had been destroyed during Crystal Night, and its remains of grass and pebbles was all that was left of it.

I gave up. I could not spend my entire vacation looking for a ghost. I made a mental note that a bombed-out or razed part of a street looks very different--was unrecognizable in fact--from an intact street living in one's memory. But the doorman's answer, it turned out, did not satisfy me after all, not enough to put the matter out of my mind for good. The buildings to the left and right of the fenced-in vestige of the house somehow did not match my recollection of the total scene.

I often reflected on the question of why the issue was important enough to me to spend so much time and energy. The answer I came up with was that my need to keep alive the memory of my English interlude, that transit between Austria and America which, despite its brevity, was a significant slice of my life and my adjustment to my uprooting, was more than a mere intermission. It represented an assimilation process which made the trauma of change less harsh and prepared me for my transatlantic future far better than if I had, like so many others, been abruptly transplanted from Vienna to New York. And this transition to my development, which stood me in good stead after my second emigration to the United States, was made infinitely

easier through the charity of those who supported the work of Bloomsbury House and the benevolence for which it stood in my reminiscences. Thus, the building was a symbol of optimism and hope and the kindness of people, in sharp contrast to what my family and I had experienced in the year we spent under Nazi control. My loyalty to an edifice dedicated to charity was my way of expressing my gratitude to a whole country.

It took one more trip to England, this time to do research in Central European history, finally to put the ghost to rest and with it my haunting doubts. A history of Bloomsbury I picked up in one of the bookstores near the British Museum directed me to the very place which was the target of my search. It explained that the building had in fact been razed, after being damaged by bombs, and later a new building, consisting of offices of one kind or another, was erected in its place. No wonder I could not find it.

Much ado about nothing? A lot of fuss about a hole in the ground? Maybe. But somehow I don't think so.